



## **DANGER ZONE ONE**

### **— CYBER ZONE —**

*Not exactly what I had in mind for Valentine's Day*, Cherie thought to herself while setting a large cardboard box onto the table. With a sigh, she surveyed the box's contents—a collection of outdated tech from the PCPD's evidence archive. Due to the department's recent budget cuts, Cherie was the only full-time employee in the Cyber Crimes Division, which had left the sorting and discarding of confiscated technology up to her. Technically, this would have been a job for the PCPD's resident Criminal Tech Analyst—but Irene Soren was a popular lady on Valentine's Day...

A sudden chill had caused Cherie to shiver. Despite having been with Cyber Crimes for over a year, she had never grown completely accustomed to working in the lowest sub-level of the police department—simply referred to as The Crypt by most officers. Cherie had always considered the nickname appropriate, especially since the sub-level was so poorly lit and kept colder than the police morgue. The frigid temperature, which often resultant in coolant vapor rolling along the floor, was maintained to preserve the various computer terminals and equipment. But, more importantly, it keep the building's SubCore from overheating. Most of Pallad City sourced its energy from a central GeoCore, but the PCPD's SubCore was separate, designed to continue running should the rest of the city lose power.

Cherie rummaged through the box, pushing aside a mess of multicolored wires, obsolete NetPhones, and archaic crypto-sequencers. From what she could tell, most of the tech looked years—if not decades—old. Normally, she would have been pleased to search through vintage equipment that the department had seized, but what she saw looked more like junkyard scrap than technological treasures.

She held up a handheld sequencer and frowned. The device's black-plated finish was plastered with scratches and dents. *Probably once used to infiltrate electronic locks and cred chips*, Cherie thought, tapping the power button to no avail. *I'm betting this thing hasn't worked in years.*

Tossing the device back into the box, she fished around for another object—one hopefully more interesting. Ninth generation Mireflex haptic gloves, an illegal bio-identification decoder, and black

market backscatter specs were only a few of the less-than-impressive finds. *Looks like this whole box can be tossed*, Cherie told herself, *nothing here worth keeping...*

No sooner had the thought crossed her mind when she caught a glimpse of something nestled snugly at the bottom of the box, half-concealed beneath extraneous wires and discarded finger scanners. Curious, she dug through the contents, uncovering a chrome headband with two triangular ear-like protrusions on the top.

Cherie's eyes widened, pulling the device out of the box and leaning over to give her discovery a closer look. "Wow, this is an N.PAL!"

In her eagerness, Cherie was tempted to put the device on and check if it worked—but caution got the better of her. *Best to play it safe, after all, who knows what failsafes are on the device.*

N.PALs—short for NeuroNet Personal Access Link—were no longer being manufactured and vintage ones commanded top dollar on auction sites. It wasn't everyday Cherie had an opportunity to tinker with rare tech but, at the same time, it didn't mean she wanted brainburn or worst. Irene had told her of a situation where a police tech analyst put on a confiscated VR headset and had their brain fried due to an illegal neural-blockade installed in the device.

Cherie sat down at her desk, grabbed her custom infiltration drive, and ran a cable from it to the N.PAL. The infiltration drive would serve as an external kill-switch, shutting down the N.PAL should it expend an unusually high energy output or operate outside of expected conditions. She plugged the cable jack into the side of the N.PAL and, after checking that her drive was active, put the device over her head. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the nearest computer screen, amused that it looked like she had two chrome cat ears sticking out of her pink hair. She took a deep breath and pressed the side of the device, turning it on.

Immediately, a holographic screen appeared in front of Cherie's face, though she knew the image wasn't *actually* there. The N.PAL worked by sending a signal directly to the human brain, providing a visual and auditory experience via an augmented reality interface that only the user would perceive. With a combination of mental instructions and simple physical gestures, the AR interface could then be manipulated.

### **Initiate?**

The screen in front of Cherie flashed with the bold text.

*Sure, why not?* She poked her finger outward and 'touched' the holoscreen. An immediate flash of light caused Cherie to wince, shutting her eyes for the briefest of moments. When she opened them, her surroundings were entirely foreign to her.

In every direction was utter blackness—the only light being frenetic streaks of luminescent neon. They zipped by with lighting-fast speed, each in an array of brilliant, random color.

"Hold on!" Cherie yelped, her heart nearly leaping into her throat. The N.PAL was supposed to provide an augmented reality data-overlay *over* the real-world. What she was experiencing now was something closer to full *virtual* reality. She wasn't aware an N.PAL could even be capable of such a feat. And while it was true that N.PALs *did* send extrasensory signals to the human brain, she wasn't wearing goggles or a VR headset—making her current situation all the more perplexing.

Cherie quickly reached for the top of her head, eager to get the N.PAL off as fast as she could—but her fingers only grasped at empty air. There was no device to be found. *No way*, she thought, *how's this happening?*

Cherie lowered her arms and took in a deep breath, trying to rationalize the situation. To the best of her knowledge, the N.PAL had somehow *manipulated* her brain into thinking that she was in a virtual realm. Surely, the device was still on her head, and she still sat in her chair back in The Crypt—but her body was likely rendered motionless, little more than an empty shell. She deduced that moving around and interacting in this virtual simulation was a purely *mental* feat and had no bearing on the physical world, or else she would have already been able to remove the N.PAL.

*But why hadn't my infiltration drive prevented this?* She hated to admit it, but there was only *one*

answer. Whatever program had been installed on the N.PAL was *better* designed than the program on her drive. It wasn't a comforting thought, but Cherie had more important things on her mind than comforting her own failure and bruised ego.

"Unidentified program located," a loud, mechanized voice cut through the neon-streaked darkness. "State your function."

Cherie glanced around, searching for the source of the voice, but found nothing.

"State your function," the voice repeated, crackling with raised intensity.

"Are you talking to me?" Cherie asked, confused.

"State your function, program."

"Uh, I'm not a program," she replied, "I don't even know *how* I got here."

"Not a program?" The voice lowered, followed by silence.

"What is this place?" Cherie called out. "Who—*or what*—are you?"

"I am Mother Dawn," it replied in a deep, artificial voice that lacked even the slightest hint of humanity and, despite its self-proclaimed name, sounded anything *but* feminine. "I serve as master control to the HEWRS—HyperNet Entity Weapon Retaliatory System."

"Weapon retaliatory system..." Cherie repeated, contemplating the words.

"If you are not a program, then you malware," Mother Dawn decreed. "All malware must be purged."

The glowing beams of neon began to speed up in their rapid traversal, followed by a blaring whine that forced Cherie to cup her hands over her ears.

"Hold on," she shouted, "I'm *not* malware—I'm a human!"

"Human?"

"Yeah," Cherie replied, relieved that the thunderous noise was already dying down. "Flesh and blood."

The neon beams diverged from their prior course and shot forward, meeting at a center point in the darkness. Within moments the light had curved, forming a glowing, multicolored orb that hung over Cherie.

"Yes, human entity confirmed," Mother Dawn said, each word causing the orb to briefly flicker.

*Guess that's its neural core*, Cherie deduced, gazing up at the hovering luminescent ball.

"All is now understood," Mother Dawn continued. "You wish to initiate the HEWRS, as per command direction Omega Nine-Nine."

"Uh, not exactly," Cherie flailed her hands, forcing out a weak smile. "This was kind of an accident. I just found an old N.PAL and—"

"Mother Dawn understands. Your ability to issue directive initiation has been compromised. Mother Dawn will now assume role of master control."

"Hold on a second," Cherie responded, voice on edge, "what's your purpose? What's HEWRS for?"

"Mother Dawn is designed to initiate HEWRS. HEWRS is the last line in strategic retaliation, implemented in the event of global nuclear confrontation."

"Huh—?" Cherie's mouth dropped open. "What nuclear confrontation? There's no nuclear confrontation...!"

"Initiating Omega Nine-Nine protocol," Mother Dawn announced, cold and emotionless. "Activating HEWRS."

"No, no, no," Cherie said, taking a step forward, "cancel that!"

"Negative. Projected nuclear launch in ten minutes."

"Nuclear launch?" Cherie gasped. She thrust a finger out, hoping that the N.PAL's Net connectivity was still accessible. Sure enough, a holoscreen appeared in front of her, complete with a keypad. Her fingers stabbed at the holokeys and, within seconds, she was searching the Net. Cherie prided herself as a Netraver—an elite hacker—and there was little on the Net that she couldn't find.

Sure enough, after several attempts at infiltrating 'secure' military databases, her search for the words Mother Dawn and HEWRS found a match. Six more holoscreens blinked to life in front of her, each filled with text.

"This is incredible..." Cherie muttered, reading the holographic files as they appeared. Mother Dawn had been a military program, created nearly fifty years ago, to act as a last resort in nuclear conflict. Should a human be incapable or unwilling to carry out orders and issue a nuclear payload against enemy countries, Mother Dawn would step in. HEWRS served as the *final* retaliation in a doomsday scenario—guaranteeing mutually assured destruction during all-out global war where catastrophic defeat was imminent. After reading a few more holoscreens of text, Cherie discovered the purpose of Omega Nine-Nine—Mother Dawn's last command to remotely launch the country's nuclear arsenal at foreign nations.

Despite the dire information Cherie had just taken in, she breathed a sigh of relief. *What are the chances any nukes are still linked to the Mother Dawn system? Fifty years is a long time to not change launch codes...*

Cherie quickly Net-dived into a dozen nuclear installations and, much to her satisfaction, found that none were remotely accessible. She looked up to the glowing orb and grinned. "So much for activating HEWRS, huh?"

"Negative," Mother Dawn responded. "Frenex-Two is online. Your Net search was insufficient."

"Frenex?" Cherie had heard that term before—it referred to a military satellite system. She returned to the holographic keypad and searched for various Frenex satellites. With over one-hundred sats in orbit that carried nuclear warheads, she was delighted to find that none were linked to Mother Dawn. She couldn't even locate any satellite with the name Frenex-Two, and concluded that it must have been taken offline at some point during the last five decades. "There is no Frenex-Two currently active."

"Negative," Mother Dawn said. "Frenex-Two is not in any database. It is neither on land or in orbit."

"Then where is it?" Cherie asked, continuing her search on the Net. "Where else could it possibly be if it's not—" she trailed off, realizing what she missed. "It's underwater, isn't it?!"

"The Dering Sea," Mother Dawn confirmed. "Access link has been established. Initiating launch procedure."

"But there's no current nuclear conflict," Cherie pleaded. "Check the Net...see for yourself. You're not fulfilling the original directive you've been programmed with. The scenario you were designed for isn't currently happening!"

"Mother Dawn must fulfill the primary objective," the mechanical voice explained. "Regardless of current conflict, nuclear war is inevitable. Omega Nine-Nine will proceed."

Cherie returned to her Net search, scouring the recesses of the Net for any data on how to shut down Mother Dawn. *There's got to be something, at least some kind of failsafe...* The files she was searching for were better hidden than she expected and, much to her disappointment, lacked the info she needed. Instead, what she discovered was that Mother Dawn had no failsafe built-in. In fact, the entire project had been shuttered because the AI appeared to be developing a sentience of its own—one with directives counter to its programmers goals. So much so, that the AI had expressed notable resentment toward its human creators, and humanity in general. *That probably explains its desire to launch the nukes...*

There was now only one option left, Cherie had to *directly* hack Mother Dawn and shut the program down. *But what if the AI's grown too advanced and gets aware of what I'm doing?*

"It's almost like you're *trying* to think for yourself," Cherie said, mustering as smug a voice as she could. "That's pretty funny, y'know, for a machine."

"Mother Dawn is sentient." The hovering orb glowed. "Mother Dawn can process any cognitive-based function thirty-seven-thousand times faster than a human with the highest IQ."

“So you say,” Cherie shrugged, “but it took a *human* to reactivate you. Without me, you'd still be tossed in a pile of scrap with all the other junk. Not so impressive, is it?”

“Mother Dawn is aware of your attempts to provoke a response. That will not happen. Frenex-Two will launch in five minutes.”

Cherie activated one of the holoscreens, finally finding the location of the Frenex-Two underwater base, thanks to a rogue ShadowNet server. From what she could tell, the nuclear warheads were online. She hacked deeper into the Frenex-Two's database. Not a single human currently resided at the base—it had been fully automated years ago. Going even further into the network, she discovered which countries the nukes were programmed to target: Galvograd, Tehram, Zardika, Marabia, Neo Edo—the list went on.

*I just need Mother Dawn to be distracted for a a minute—less even, Cherie thought, just long enough to infiltrate its primary firewall. The program's fifty years old, I could bypass something like that in my sleep. The problem's the AI—it'll catch me during the attempt. Maybe I can challenge it? But to what? Chess? It'll probably be able to launch the nukes and effortlessly play a thousand simultaneous chess games.*

Cherie grit her teeth, eyes darting from one holoscreen to the next. *If those nukes launch, it's over for humanity. And it's not like I can reason with an uncaring machine...*

Cherie's entire body stiffened, then she clapped her hands together. *That's it—I got it!*

“You think you're pretty smart, huh?” Cherie said with a grin.

“There is no speculation, Mother Dawn far exceeds the minuscule limits of any carbon-based intelligence.”

“Maybe,” Cherie cocked her head back, flicking one of her pink pigtails with the back of her hand, “but compared to me, you're not so bright.”

“Human arrogance has proven to be no indication of one's intellect,” Mother Dawn replied, mechanically.

“Oh,” Cherie folded her arms, “then I'm sure you can solve a little riddle.”

“Mother Dawn is not interested in games.”

“Really? I'd think this would be simple for you, if you're as intelligent as you say. I mean, let's be honest, you did a little boasting yourself.” Cherie offered a playful wink. “How very *human* of you.”

The orb above Cherie blinked.

“You know what? Instead of saying the riddle aloud, I'll even type it out...” Cherie's fingers worked over the nearest holoscreen.

**You will wish me gone without a trace  
But I am necessary for the human race  
I am known to all, the fearful and brave  
Without me, there would be none to save  
I can be difficult to stop, yet so easy to give  
If I were gone, could you say you truly lived?  
WHAT AM I?**

Cherie finished typing and looked up to the orb. “So, a program as intelligent as yourself should have zero problem with that one, right?”

The orb glowed but didn't answer.

“Having a little trouble?” Cherie shrugged. “Need some help? Don't tell me you give up already?”

“Negative.”

“All that processing power and it's already taken you,” Cherie mockingly pointed to her bare wrist as if she were pretending to wear a watch, “a whole ten seconds! At this rate, you'll *never* figure it out.”

“Negative. Mother Dawn is processing the question.”

Just as Cherie had hoped, Mother Dawn's attention to the firewall had diminished. Without its complete focus, Cherie could infiltrate the system. She lowered her arms, carefully stretching her fingers out and typing away on two holographic keypads—hoping that the AI wouldn't notice. She would at least need thirty seconds.

Much to her surprise, while hacking through the AI, she was able to locate a folder that linked to her external infiltration drive. She accessed it, transferring a malware program into Mother Dawn. Her attention kept shifting to a countdown timer on the holoscreen directly in front of her. Only one minute until the nukes launch from Frenex-Two. *This is gonna be close!*

“Negative,” Mother Dawn said, its computerized tone ever so slightly wavering. “This question has no logical answer.”

“It's such an *easy* riddle,” Cherie laughed. “A kid could've figured it out—a *human* kid, anyway. It's only difficult for you, because you're a *machine*. After all, what does an AI know about pain?”

“Pain?” Mother Dawn repeated. “That is the answer?”

“Yep—*every* human experiences it,” Cherie said defiantly, “both physical *and* emotional pain. We don't want it, but it's necessary—it's an inherent *part* of being human.”

“Human weakness is of no concern to Mother Dawn.”

“Yeah?” Cherie perked up. “Well, that 'weakness' is how you just lost...” She input the last line of code into the keypad and then threw her hands up. “So much for the all-knowing computer!”

The orb above Cherie grew brighter. “You infiltrated Mother Dawn?”

Cherie pointed at the holoscreen in front of her, her finger jabbing at the nuclear launch countdown. “Thirty-seven-thousand times faster than the smartest human, but one second slower than *me!*”

**00:01**

The number was frozen in place.

“Say goodbye to Omega Nine-Nine...” Cherie smirked.

“N-neg-negative,” Mother Dawn responded, its voice breaking up in distorted crackles. “Wh-what is ha-happening...”

“That's just the worm I installed in your program,” Cherie explained. “It's working its way through your entire system, erasing chunks of code and fracturing your cognitive-based functions. Basically, it's a version of cyber brainburn.”

“N-no, M-Mother D-Dawn c-can not b-be de-deactivated.”

“I guess, for a computer,” Cherie winked, “this is kind of like *pain*, huh?”

The orb erupted into a blast of blinding light, causing Cherie to slam her eyes shut and turn away. When she opened them, she was back in the Crypt, still seated in her chair. Relieved, she quickly reached for the N.PAL and yanked it off her head.

“Who would've guessed *you'd* be so much trouble,” Cherie muttered, giving the device a sharp glare before tossing it aside. She stood up and stretched.

*Maybe a quiet Valentine's Day would've been for the best after all!*

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